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ABSTRACT

The Instructional Support Team (IST) process is mandated in all Pennsylvania schools that include any grade from kindergarten through 6. Middle schools that house grade six or below are required to enroll in IST training and ultimately achieve IST validation. In addition to the IST requirement, all secondary schools are required to have a Student Assistance Team. In grades K through 6, Student Assistance functions are incorporated into the IST. This document offers suggestions to middle schools beginning to address the task of providing both Student Assistance and Instructional Support within their buildings. The underlying theme is to clarify the requirements while providing sufficient flexibility for the creation of a site-specific process that is sensible for each individual school. Rather than conceptualizing students as Instructional Support cases or Student Assistance cases, the goal is to see each student as a child with a variety of needs that can be met by a variety of resources working together. Sections of the document address initial planning and decision making, training issues, validation issues, implementation issues, and record keeping. (ND)

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IST

The Instructional Support Team

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Suggestions for Implementing Instructional Support Teams

And

Student Assistance in Middle Schools

Joseph F. Kovaleski, editor

A Systematic Search for What Works!

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SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT TEAMS AND STUDENT ASSISTANCE TEAMS IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS

BACKGROUND

The Instructional Support Team (IST) process is mandated in all schools of the Commonwealth that include any grade from kindergarten through 6. Middle schools that house grade six or below are required to enroll in IST training and ultimately achieve IST validation. In addition to the IST requirement, all secondary schools are required to have a Student Assistance (SAP) Team. In grades K through 6, Student Assistance functions are incorporated into the IST.

The implementation of these different initiatives and mandates are particularly challenging in middle schools that house combinations of elementary grades (5 and/or 6) as well as secondary grades (7 and/or 8). In addition to the potentially confusing array of requirements, middle schools present particular challenges to implementation due to the wide diversity of developmental levels among the students and the differences in organization and teaching styles that fit neither elementary nor secondary models. It is the intent of this document to offer suggestions to middle schools as they begin to address the task of providing both Student Assistance and Instructional Support within their buildings. The underlying theme of this document is to clarify the requirements while providing sufficient flexibility for the creation of a site-specific process that is sensible for each individual school.

In developing these suggestions, regulations were scrutinized and input received from middle school staff from around the Commonwealth. As middle school planning teams use this document to make decisions about such matters as the number of teams in their buildings and the interface between them in identifying students and planning interventions, it is expected that each school will provide the best possible service for all students. It is hoped that rather than conceptualizing students as Instructional Support cases or Student Assistance cases, that each student is seen as a whole child with a variety of needs that can be met by a variety of resources working together.

INITIAL PLANNING AND DECISION MAKING

Through the 1994-95 school year, training for middle schools in Instructional Support has been provided to school districts by the IST Project and by the Secondary Instructional Support (SIS) Project. As of the 1995-96 school year, the IST Project is responsible for training in all middle schools that house grade 6 or below. Secondary schools that house grade 7 and above that have started instructional support programs prior to 1995-96 have been advised to seek further technical assistance from the Statewide Support Initiative of their local intermediate unit.

During the Fall of 1995, IST consultants met with middle school administrators to ascertain implementation plans and to conduct needs assessments for future training. The planning was oriented according to the training history of the individual school, as indicated below.

Middle Schools Trained by the "Elementary" IST Project

There are a number of middle schools that have received their training through the "elementary" IST Project. Many of these schools have achieved validation, while the remainder are due for their second year of training toward validation. Follow-up training for these schools is being scheduled to proceed as planned through the IU SSI programs.

Schools That Have Received No Instructional Support Training

As a result of the Fall, 1995 meetings, many middle schools that have not received Instructional Support training of any kind have enrolled for the 1995-96 training program. Other schools have decided to postpone the initiation of IST training to a future school year. (At this time, PDE has not yet indicated the date by which all schools must initiate the IST process.) At the point of entry into IST training, a comprehensive two-year training program will be provided according to the unique aspects of the middle school, with validation activities anticipated for the second year of this process.

Middle Schools Trained by the Secondary Instructional Support Project

During the Fall of 1995, IST consultants have also met with principals of middle schools that were trained by the SIS Project to discern the school districts' intentions for putting in place a validatable IST program. Middle schools that are receiving unit funding for the development of the IST program will be starting their official two-year training program toward validation in the 1995-96 school year. School districts that are not receiving funding for the initiation of IST in the middle school have the option to initiate the official two-year training/validation cycle in 1995-96 or to postpone training toward validation to a future year.

Operation of IST in Grades 7 and Above in Middle Schools

If middle schools that house grades 6 and below wish to extend the Instructional Support program to all grades in the school, IST consultants will provide training to the school as a whole. However, the school is only required to operate the program through grade 6.

TRAINING ISSUES

When the district requests that the IST training/validation cycle begins, the IST consultant will conduct a needs assessment of the status of the implementation of the IST program and of the training needed to prepare for validation. In the training needs assessment, training provided through the SIS program should be acknowledged as sufficient for instructional support training according to the judgment of the IST consultant. Successful training need not be repeated, rather a training plan should be developed that incorporates any training that has not been provided to date.

The assessment of training needs should be based on what training has been undertaken by the middle school as well as the level of implementation of that training feature. For example, if members of the IST have attended training in instructional adaptations, but there is no evidence that instructional adaptations are used in the IST process, attendance at large group training in this area may not have to be repeated, but on-site guided practice may be indicated. The results of the needs assessment should be an action plan that specifies the training experiences to be provided and a timeline toward validation review.

Some specific issues related to IST training components follow.

Collaboration

Training in collaboration has been highly similar in the IST Project and in the SIS Project. Middle school staff should be familiarized with the Entry-Hypothesis Development-Verifying-Outcome language.

Instructional Assessment

Teams should be trained to provide instructional assessment of student's academic skills in an age-appropriate manner. In fifth and sixth grade, the procedures that include curriculum-based assessment are pertinent. For training with seventh and eighth grade staff, material from the Mastery Learning Components and Reading in the Content Area component of the SIS Program may be useful in understanding instructional assessment with older students.

Instructional Adaptation/Learning Strategies

For all middle school grades, strategies in instructional adaptation (e.g., ADAPT) are pertinent for all teachers. Training in learning strategies also applies to this age range. Consequently, comprehensive training in instructional adaptations and learning strategies for middle schools should include both instructional adaptations and learning strategies.

Student Assistance/Elementary Student Assistance

It is expected that middle schools will have in place a SAP team that has received secondary SAP training. In order to accommodate students in fifth and sixth grade, team members from these grades should also attend Elementary Student Assistance training. The building administrator assigned to the SAP program and the IST and the support teacher must attend the training. It is strongly recommended that a member of the pupil services staff and two classroom teachers attend as well.

Principal's Training

When the middle school begins the two-year validation-based training program, the principal should attend a one day orientation to IST, and the two-day session of PPTM, which is generally held the summer before initiation of the program. However, IST consultants may waive Principals' Training for principals of middle schools if the principal has received extensive training through the SIS program.

Team Training

Midway through the first year of validation-based training, the middle school team or teams typically attend Team Training. This training may be waived if a similar training has been completed through the SIS program.

VALIDATION ISSUES

Validation in the IST process is dependent upon the completion of the IST training sequence and the successful implementation of the IST process according to the Special Education Regulations and Standards. In terms of implementation features, all middle schools should be called upon to be validated according to an IST model that is appropriate for middle schools and meets Regulations and Standards. Two common deviations from the traditional IST program found in elementary schools are considered acceptable alterations for validation in middle schools:

- Middle schools may use a grade level team that provides instructional support rather than a separate standing Instructional Support Team.

- Middle schools may use a full-time equivalent (FTE) rather than a full-time support teacher model. In middle schools where the number of students in grades 6 and below is substantially less than 500 students, prorating of the FTE would be acceptable. For example, a middle school with 250 sixth graders might use a 1/3 FTE rather than a full-time teacher.

These or other acceptable deviations should be reviewed during the needs assessment. When an approvable plan is ascertained, the district should amend their IST application and agreement and submit them for approval to BSE.

As indicated above, once the school embarks on its validation-based training, a validation visit occurs toward the end of the second year of training. While it is only required that the validation team visit and report on the fifth and/or sixth grade, the middle school may opt to have the whole school reviewed in order to receive feedback on its entire operation of instructional support. If this arrangement occurs, the validation team will give feedback for the whole school but only hold the school responsible for meeting required items in fifth and sixth grades.

In reviewing the service delivery model in place at a given middle school, the visiting validation team will need to note the allowable variations of procedures for middle schools when making their report. The model in place in each middle school will need to match the description provided by the school district to the Bureau of Special Education in its IST application/agreement. An approved IST application/agreement signals to the school district that its IST model is approvable under existing Regulations and Standards.

IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

Decisions on Team Structures

The foremost implementation issue faced by middle schools is how to organize a team or teams to address the requirements of both Instructional Support and Student Assistance. In making this decision, schools should be aware of the pitfalls of having too many teams. In many schools, in addition to IST and SAP functions, districts also have grade level teams, subject departments, teams for inclusion of students with disabilities (GATEWAYS), multidisciplinary evaluation teams, etc. Organizing all of these functions in a coherent manner is a critical decision that middle schools face.

Many middle schools have effectively utilized grade-level teams to undertake the functions of IST, rather than having separate teams for these purposes. It should be noted that such deviations may not only be effective team approaches but may also be acceptable from a Regulations perspective. Compliance with Special Education Regulations can be accomplished by assuring that all of the requirements of IST are incorporated into the grade-level team process. Middle schools should consult with the SAP Regional Coordinators with any plans to integrate SAP with grade level teams.

In making the decision on how many teams to have, a number of factors need to be weighed. First, proliferating numerous teams with overlapping functions tends to induce system fragmentation. On the other hand, overloading already busy teams with too many functions may seriously inhibit effectiveness. In any case, it is recommended that all teams have flexible membership so that articulation and communication between different teams and professional staff is facilitated.

Meeting the SAP Regulations

For compliance with SAP requirements, the following recommendations apply if the school decides to use two or more teams:

- There should be some team members who are common to the SAP team and other teams that will receive all training required by IST and SAP (e.g., principal, guidance counselor, support teacher, classroom teacher, etc.). If grades 5 and/or 6 are included in the middle school, some team members must also attend Elementary Student Assistance training.

- The central office administrator responsible for each initiative should develop a mechanism for joint planning and communication for teams. It would be optimal if the same administrator coordinated both functions.

- Both teams should meet to cross-train and jointly plan regarding functions, roles/responsibilities, procedures (e.g., flow charts, a joint assessment process), and a process for close communication between both.

- A mechanism for simultaneous data collection and a joint assessment for identification of the barriers to student success should be developed for all referrals.

- It is appropriate for a student to receive services from both teams if the joint assessment determines the student could benefit from an instructional support and a student assistance intervention. A process for on-going communication and case management will be important in these cases.

- All existing SAP guidelines must be followed.

If one team to cover both SAP and IST functions is chosen, the following recommendations apply:

- In considering a single team, one recommendation has been that a combined concept should not be developed until two separate teams have functioned for at least two years. This allows the IST process to be fully developed before the teams integrate into one functioning unit. Buildings who choose to combine instructional support and student assistance must allocate sufficient time (beyond what is noted in the SAP Guidelines) for the team to develop and carry out the instructional support and student assistance functions.

- All team members should attend training in all components of instructional support and student assistance. If grades 5 and/or 6 are included in the middle school, at least the building administrator assigned to the team and the instructional support teacher must receive training in the Elementary Student Assistance component. Again, it is strongly recommended that a member of the pupil services staff and two classroom teachers attend as well.

- A mechanism for self/peer referrals must be established.

- All SAP and IST data collection processes must be followed.

- In many cases, a two-pronged intervention plan may be appropriate. This might include both an instructional support and student assistance intervention plan.

- One assessment process for integrating the needs of academic, behavioral, and affective areas should be developed.

- All existing SAP Guidelines should be followed

Employment of the Support Teacher

The Special Education Regulations and Standards indicate that each school have in place a support teacher or full-time equivalent. However, because IST is only required to grade 6, how this position is staffed may vary in different school districts.

In complying with the requirement for a support teacher or full-time equivalent through sixth grade, the following options can be considered:

- A support teacher may be employed to cover all grades at the middle school.

- A support teacher from an elementary school may be utilized in fifth or sixth grade.

- A full-time equivalent model might be utilized throughout the middle school.

In making this decision, coherence of programming is critical. It is seen as unwise for different structures to exist at fifth and/or at sixth grade than exist at seventh or eighth grade. Most middle schools that provided input to this document indicated that a consistent staff organization throughout the middle school is preferable. For this reason, either the model of the support teacher working in all grades or the full-time equivalent models may be preferred. If a full-time equivalent model is selected, it is critical for personnel who are part of the full-time equivalent to be freed from classroom and other duties in order to provide the functions of instructional support. In middle schools where the number of students in grades 6 and below is substantially less than 500 students, prorating of the FTE would be acceptable. A separate document on use of the full-time equivalent model is available from the IST Project.

Level III Screening

At the point at which the middle school begins its two-year validation-based training, provisions must be made for the instructional support process to serve as a screening vehicle for potential eligibility for special education (Level III screening). Any student being considered for MDE with the exception of students who display severe sensory, physical, or speech and language disabilities, must first go through a period of instructional support.

Focus of Interventions

The organizational structure of most middle schools in which students travel to different classrooms and different teachers in order to receive instruction in different subjects provides a special challenge for the provision of instructional support. Instructional Support Teams at the middle school need to take into account in building their team and in planning interventions the necessity to provide interventions in a number of classrooms in which the student is having difficulty. Consultation with all of the teachers who are responsible for the identified student is critical. This issue provides one reason why a grade-based team structure that provides the function of instructional support may be the preferred model at middle school.

A related issue is that middle school teachers may work from a more content perspective than do their counterparts in elementary schools. Consequently, they may be more likely to favor whole group interventions rather than strategies that require separate techniques for individual students.

Timelines

The Special Education Regulations and Standards provides for specific timelines that guide the operation of Instructional Support Teams for all students from grades kindergarten through sixth. Consequently, when Instructional Support Teams are used for Level III screening in middle schools to grade 6, these timelines apply. If a team is providing Instructional Support as part of a grade level team, there will be times when the team is doing general instructional consultation, and other times when it is doing Level III screening. The timelines only apply when Level III screening is being undertaken.

RECORD KEEPING

Required Data for IST

The Special Education Regulations and Standards requires that all schools that implement the IST keep the following data:

- Name of student
- Date of request for assistance
- Name of person making the request
- Date of parent contact
- Date and nature of student-specific action

These data must be kept on all students receiving Instructional Support as Level III screening when the middle school enters its validation-based training phase. The Principal's Log is the preferred (although not required) method of expedient collection of these data.

At the point when the school receives unit funding for IST or volunteers to begin the validation-based training, the school must also provide to the Bureau of Special Education required data as collected through the Building Information Form, including:

- number of students identified for instructional support
- number of students referred for multidisciplinary evaluation
- number of students placed in special education
- number of students retained in grade.

Required Data for SAP

Student Assistance Program data will still be maintained for all middle school and high school students within the Opti-Scan tracking system.

SDFSCA AND ACT 211 MONITORING SITE VISITS

Site visits for the Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities Act (SDFSCA) and Act 211 are being conducted in school districts each year. During these visits, the site monitor will review Student Assistance services being offered at all grade levels.